

Sister Mary Dwyer, SC

It was not an easy decision for St. Mary to leave the school and families at St. Joseph's, Pensacola, Florida in 1969 after serving so many years among the poor of that community, but she did so with her characteristic sense of duty and dedication. Of course, she recounts, with humor, the day at the provincial house, how the provincial had said, quite seriously, that they had asked everyone they could and would she consider becoming principal of St. Columba School in Newark, and how upon leaving, tears in her eyes, she backed up into another sister's car and had to go back again into the provincial house.

Newark was so different from her Southern experience. The parish where she would be principal for the next twenty three years was in one of the poorest sections of the poorest city in the state. Newark had erupted in riots only two years earlier. Their substandard housing meant bad plumbing for the bathroom that you shared with the other tenants on the floor. A house of prostitution was directly across from the convent on South Street and the poorest among the residents were the elderly white individuals and couples who were unable to flee Newark when their children and friends left.

It was never enough for St. Mary to be just principal of St. Columba School. Responding to St. Vincent de Paul's call to do "more", she began to assume many more roles in order to serve the families of the school and parish. Without her initiative and, more importantly, perseverance, St. Columba might not have had a school breakfast and lunch program. So many of the resources our families have now as regular programs were brought with the tenacity that is one of St. Mary's gifts. The experiences that she gained in learning how to win on the paper trail of bureaucracy prepared her for her next goal—to get an after care program for children between 3pm and 6pm. All of this was done before it was "unthinkable" or easy to get day care funds. These efforts led to the Title XX Summer and After School Program. The children of St. Columba often are at the kitchen door of the school by 7:30 (and St. Mary is there to greet them) and don't leave our care until 6:00 at night. This happens year round.

In 1967 Sister Mary began to put together a new dream to serve the children—a day care center on the first floor of the convent. Her reasoning was that so many of the young people leave the neighborhood because they cannot find the services that will make life possible for them. Day care is one essential one. Again, pursuing every hearing ear among the bureaucrats and day care consultants, she built the day care and saw children of St. Columba graduates among the first children registering.

In many places, there is a public school right next to a parochial school. This is not the case at St. Columba. Sr. Mary has felt that it was important for families from the neighborhood to be able to attend the school. So the tuition has been kept as low as possible to make that happen. Sr. Mary has found that this had an important side effect. The families most in need began to come. They were often the "unchurched", but they were God's poor and as such were special to her. She walked with them not only as they went through school, but years after. To her education was life long and her commitment to them was just that. She was there at the birth of their children, there at their high school graduations be it from the Academies or East Side High, there if they had to be in court and she was equally present to them and their families in illness and death. Unfortunately, we experience the death of so many of our young—AIDS, drugs, the violence of the street—but Sr. Mary has sown the seeds of hope as well in ground that seemed fallow. There are a good number of families who do not live in the neighborhood, but send their children here, because the experience was so positive for them.

To keep tuition low, Sr. Mary began to approach private foundations to assist her in her many dreams and schemes. The Victoria Foundation recognized the uniqueness of St. Columba and for many years has supported the Title XX Program. The Campaign for Human Development was an early supporter of a unique parental involvement language arts program for Spanish-speaking students and their parents. Sr. Mary herself became a bridge to Catholics in the suburbs, welcoming them to join in the work of St. Columba. She would be as likely to visit them in the hospital as a neighborhood family. She knew their stories as well and they became intertwined with the families on the block. Every Thanksgiving week, a group would bring down an REA Express truck from St. Andrew's Westwood with food

and clothing. Their kids met our kids and watch each other grow. St. Joseph's Shrine in Stirling held an auction of talents and that money sent our graduates to Catholic high schools. So many times the interaction led to exchanges that enriched the lives of our parishes. And St. Mary was the catalyst and the example in all of these efforts.

This work alone would be enough along with the day to day operation of the school, but Sr. Mary has worked bingo twice a week for all these years. A typical weekend might be to teach in the Chapter I Program held at Essex County College, do bingo, and then go to speak at one of the parishes about the F.E.A. (Fund for Educational Advancement). Sunday would be more talks at the parishes and then bingo. Maybe there might be a trip to see someone in the hospital or stopping by a baptism or other family gathering. She appears on Monday as fresh and eager as if she had been away for the weekend.

Because Sr. Mary has great concerns about the neighborhood where the school is located, she has been a driving force in the St. Columba Neighborhood Club. She brought in a social worker in 1972 who began to do outreach with the families. The outgrowth of that was a major involvement of the school with families that were being forced with displacement due to "urban renewal" in 1975. The openness of the school and commitment to the families led to the creation of the St. Columba Neighborhood Club/El Club del Barrio, in 1977 a grantee of the National Campaign for Human Development. Sr. Mary has sat on the Board since the early 1980's and served at a time as interim director while the Board conducted an executive search. Sr. Mary's commitment of the community is legend. She can often get to a fire as soon as the Fire Department. During the late 1970's our community was besieged by arson fires. It was Sr. Mary who brought the families back to stay in the convent and gave them essential support during this time. If it were not fires, then mothers having to flee abusive husbands found refuge in the convent. The sisters in the convent were inspired and challenged by her spontaneous and creative charity.

A particular area of her charity was to the "Old Timers" at St. Columba. She knew that she could find the old Irish families who attended St. Columba and had since moved away and involve them in the mission of the parish. Again, she became a bridge for

experience between seemingly diverse groups. She wanted these families to help the new immigrants to receive the same good education that they had, to feel the support of the parish with families as they grew. The "Old Times" became very active, sponsoring a yearly activity. At times it was not easy for them to see the similarities against the more obvious differences of language and culture, but Sr. Mary helped them and remarks like "St. Columba used to be such a fine parish" ceased. Her Irish storyteller background won so many over to the new mission. She, too, recognized their needs and responded. It could be helping a widow move out furniture from their home or checking out a nursing home with an elderly wife for her husband, whatever it was, she responded to the need and grace of the moment.

Sr. Mary has been particularly sensitive to the lives of individuals and families who are often discriminated by society. One year, she went to visit "Louise", a neighbor on South Street who had been arrested by police for taking a radio from an unlocked car. Louise was a mentally handicapped senior citizen who lived in a residence with other adults. After Sister Mary let the police know that their crime-fighting efforts while vigorous were somewhat displaced, she returned to the house, telling the sisters that she had seen the face of Christ there at the jail.

Sister Mary travels through the community—as neighbor, as friend, as principal. Where other persons might be fearful, might confine their "ministry" to office hours, Sr. Mary is on call twenty-four hours. Only last month, she scoured the neighborhood at nearly midnight looking for a fifth grader who had run away. She thought that she had found her at the home of a sixteen year old drug dealer. He was reluctant to "turn her in." Sr. Mary convinced him of the consequences of "kidnapping" and that his life would be unbelievably miserable if she were found later to have been there. It wasn't long before the youngster appeared, the drug dealer wanting nothing to do with her. Her actions speak strongly to the call of St. Vincent de Paul who told his sisters that their chapel shall be the streets of the city.

Even in death, our families are reminded that they are not equal with others. Sister Mary, after donating a grave to a poor family who had to bury their twenty-two year old daughter who had died of brain cancer, found that the cemetery would not allow a stone to be placed on the grave, because they had waived an initial fee. Her intervention enabled the

family to complete a special part of their mourning, by erecting a small marker to be placed on the grave. This was not the first time. Sr. Mary's efforts allowed the grief stricken families of three neighborhood boys who drowned in a construction ditch to be remembered through the placement of a monument.

While much of what has been shared tells of Sr. Mary's commitment to the neighborhood community, another significant area of her involvement involves the Sisters of Charity. Her care for the senior sisters who lived at St. Columba during the first dozen years that she was missioned at St. Columba was beyond the ordinary charity of sisters sharing community. Whether it was the numerous doctor appointments or the gentle way she facilitated their retirement and new roles in the community, it was the same gentle and caring manner as with any other person. Sr. Mary continues to be active in the Villa Committee and as a Villa Visitor to the senior Sisters of Charity at St. Anne's Villa at Convent Station.

In an equally loving manner, Sister Mary has served while at St. Columba as Directress of Associates (for candidates in the years before Novitiate). Respected by the members of her Province, Sr. Mary has served both as a member of the Southern Provincial Council and the Assembly of the Southern Province for several terms.

The flow between religious community and neighborhood has been a fountain of energy and renewal. Sister Mary from a number of her volunteer activities has gained much that she has brought back to the communities she serves. She has been a volunteer at Camp Fatima, a one-on-one camp for severely retarded children. At Apostolic House Shelter, Sr. Mary would go, after bingo, cook dinner and spend the night with the mothers and children. Last summer, participating in the Le Gras experience (named after St. Lucie de Marillac and the method that the rich women used for being present with the poor), Sr. Mary spent the summer at a family shelter in El Paso, Texas. In 1991, Sr. Mary went to Mexico as part of a congregational program "Connections" where sisters could have a third world experience and be renewed.

What has been a factor in Sr. Mary's manner with the families has been her willingness to learn Spanish language and culture. Families that moved back to Puerto Rico from St. Columba were delighted to have her visit one summer. How proud she felt to see First Communion photos and Spelling Bee certificates on the walls of their simple homes in

the mountains. Recently Sr. Mary has "returned" to St. Andrew's Westwood to offer assistance to a new group. In the last few years, a significant number of Spanish-speaking families have come to that parish. Around Thanksgiving, she and Fr. Hector Elizac, pastor of St. Columba, went to explore what might happen if a community could form. A special Mass was held at Christmas and families began to identify themselves as community.

Sr. Mary brings her own talents and culture to the service of the community. Jersey City born and educated, she knows her way around city hall and Trenton. The irony is not lost on us that St. Columba is her parish. St. Columba, very political and daring, could be her patron saint. She was honored in the early 1980's by the Friends of Brian Bore as Irishwoman of the Year.

Finally, Sr. Mary embodies the notion of the Sisters of Charity—"the love of Christ urges us" and "bloom where you are planted."